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Leaks of Classified Information

TOM BROKAW: For several weeks now the Reagan Administration has been threatening to take strong legal action against news organizations in an effort to plug leaks of classified information. But tonight NBC's chief White House correspondent Chris Wallace can report that President Reagan and his advisers have privately decided to take another approach to this problem.

CHRIS WALLACE: The President took a hard line on press leaks today, saying his Administration is legally bound to prosecute reporters who disclose certain classified information.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: It isn't a case of what we may think. There is a law that was passed not just about the media, it's about anyone who makes public information which can be dangerous to our national security. And I would think that all of us are bound by that law.

WALLACE: But for all the tough talk, officials say the White House has decided for now to back away from a battle with the press and concentrate on plugging Administration leaks. And even there, it's going slowly.

The Administration will hold off on a blanket use of lie detectors to investigate leaks, which had been recommended by a task force. Each department will cut access to classified material, but within existing guidelines. However, sources say creation of a special FBI unit to probe leaks is still a live option.

All this is at least a temporary defeat for CIA Director Casey, who wants a new crackdown, and a victory for White House Chief of Staff Regan and others who worry that battling the media will hurt the rest of the President's agenda.

Vice President Bush says the Administration must police itself first.

V.P. BUSH: I don't think we ever wanted to be in a fight with the press. But we've certainly got a long way to go before we can claim victory on controlling the information that is leaked out, for one reason or another.

WALLACE: Officials say the recent campaign against leaks happened largely by chance. The Administration was first upset by disclosure of fleet movements before the raid on Libya, then further upset by detailed reports on U.S. intercepts of Libyan communications.

But the real spark, they say, was concern that stories about the Ronald Pelton spy trial might disclose new secrets. The head of a reporters group says the government may never prosecute the media, instead using threats to intimidate the press.

JANE KIRTLEY: What they're doing is creating a climate of fear for the media, and they're doing it in a very effective way.

WALLACE: But at least for now, officials here say they've gone far enough, that in dealing with leaks they don't want to create an even worse problem.

↑ Aides say Mr. Reagan has never been known as a press-basher. And they don't want him to be seen as one now.